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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUANGZHOU 000084

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV CH

SUBJECT: Chinese Bloggers Enjoy More Freedom within the "Red Lines"

REF: A) 08 GUANGZHOU 632, B) 08 GUANGZHOU 292

¶1. (U) Classified by Consul General Robert Goldberg for reason (d).

¶2. (C) Summary and comment: The fine line between outright expression and self-censorship is one that bloggers in China walk everyday. They enjoy a level of freedom unmatched by the written press, and the development of the Internet is playing an instrumental role in China's political evolution, according to Yang Hengjun, one of the country's most popular and influential bloggers. However, the relative freedom bloggers enjoy exists only within certain "red lines," which require bloggers to use various artifices to express themselves obliquely on controversial topics. Yang believes the latest government crackdown on Internet content is focused primarily on pornography not political content and commented that the "tea" sessions with police for many signatories of Charter 08 had been relatively non-threatening. Despite his blogs on some controversial issues and decision to sign Charter 08, it is clear from Yang's comments that he will not be a catalyst for radical change in China. End summary and comment.

"I Can Say Anything I Want"

¶3. (C) Bloggers in China have much more freedom of expression than print journalists, according to Yang. "I can say anything I want," he said referring to his blog. Although he acknowledged that he self-censored blog content, he emphasized that the print media is controlled much more tightly than Internet postings. Yang receives offers to write for newspapers and magazines but turns them down because editors will change his pieces. Yang doesn't know why the Chinese government treats the two forms of media so differently, but noted that the Internet was harder to control and suggested that the government had reasons to give a freer rein. He didn't elaborate on those reasons but later agreed with congenoffs that the government increasingly sees the Internet as a tool to fight corruption and enhance government accountability.

Within the "Red Lines"

¶4. (C) Even though bloggers enjoy more freedom, Yang notes that he has to censor himself within certain "red lines." His experience working for the government helps him know where those lines are. (Note: Some of the government contacts he still enjoys probably also help him to define and work within those limits. End note.) He described some of the artifices he used to make sure that his blogs on controversial topics didn't cross the line -- for example, using metaphors, describing similar situations in other countries, or focusing primarily on his own personal experiences. His piece on Tibet, which he claimed was one of the most widely read blogs in

China last year, was written as a conversation with his young son who lives in Australia, comparing the plight of Tibetans to challenges facing ethnic Chinese and aborigines in Australia. He pointed out that his most recent posting discussed the vetting of new Obama administration officials and lobbying restrictions placed on former U.S. government employees in some detail before arguing only in the very last paragraph that China as well as the United States needs a system of checks and balances in which senior officials are kept in "cages."

Networking in Person Too

15. (C) Bloggers in China are meeting regularly in person too, according to Yang. He told us that he meets frequently with other prominent bloggers in the Guangzhou area, noting that a bar owned by one blogger is a popular meeting place for them (ref A). Yang also said he travels to Beijing regularly and meets with bloggers there -- when he has the money.

Web Crackdown and Charter 08 Response

16. (C) Yang commented that the latest government crackdown on websites is aimed primarily at pornographic content just as officials have described it. He claimed that political content had not been much affected.

17. (C) Yang pointed out that he had signed Charter 08 but had not yet been asked to "have tea" with the police. Citing accounts given by friends who had been asked to "have tea," Yang said that the sessions

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were relatively low-key discussions and the atmosphere was not particularly threatening.

Criticizing the System From the Inside or Outside?

18. (C) Yang has an interesting bio for someone who paints himself as a controversial critic of the Chinese government. He was a government official for many years, including a stint with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He said he still had good connections with some senior officials and had eaten dinner with some recently in Beijing. Yang also claims to have good contacts within China's National Security Ministry. He has written several spy novels that have been published only on the Internet. In one posting, he warned those who have no knowledge of espionage not to write books on the subject, clearly implying that he has such knowledge.

19. (C) Comment: South China has numerous bloggers like Yang who are close to the government or, in some cases, are government officials themselves. Even though Yang has taken on some controversial issues in his writings like Tibet, Taiwan elections and the need for political reform; it is clear from his views on democracy, the political evolution of China, self-censorship and the government's response to Charter 08 that neither Yang nor his writings will be a catalyst for radical change in China. Nevertheless, he does represent a gradual opening of the political discussion here that could pay dividends farther down the road. End comment.

Additional Biographic Information

110. (C) Yang was named one of the 14 most influential bloggers in China by BlogChina, a popular blog-hosting website. He was born in 1965 in Suizhou, Hubei Province. He recently moved to Guangzhou to care for his elderly father in a warmer climate. His wife (separated or divorced) and two sons live in Australia. He earned a master's degree and a PhD in Australia.

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